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Parliamentarians and the covid-19 pandemic: insights from an executive-dominated, constituency-oriented legislature

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ABSTRACT

Because parliaments are the cornerstone of representative democracy, we know a significant amount about how they operate in ordinary times. Covid-19 presented extraordinary challenges to the functioning and operation of national parliaments. This article explores the impact of Covid-19 on parliament from the point of view of its members. We report results from a survey of Irish parliamentarians, exploring members' perceptions of their engagement in law-making, government oversight, and constituency representation. The results suggest an interesting paradox: Parliamentarians felt less able to perform their legislative and oversight functions but – with the aid of new technologies – felt better able to perform their representative and constituency roles. The wider implication is that Covid-19 intensified existing patterns of executive legislative relation: in the Irish case at least, the (electoral) incentives to undertake constituency work motivated continued constituency service, while the weakness of parliamentary oversight of the executive intensified.

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The Covid-19 pandemic ushered in an era of unparalleled challenges for political systems, political institutions, and individual politicians, reshaping, however temporarily, the landscape in which politics worked. National parliaments around the world reacted differently to these challenges (Bar-Simantov et al., 2021; Bolleyer & Salát, 2021; Chiru, 2024; Griglio, 2020) with implications for public policy, good governance, public acceptance of policy choices, and citizens' trust in politics and political institutions in difficult times.

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This paper explores the impact of Covid-19 on parliament from the point of view of its members. Specifically, we investigate how members' roles were influenced because of the pandemic. Looking back on these momentous times, did members perceive themselves to be engaged appropriately in law-making, oversight, and constituency representation? At a time when most national governments were implementing extraordinary public policy responses, did members feel empowered to perform fully their various law-making, oversight, and representative roles? And how did interaction with ordinary citizens change, for example through constituency work?

To help answer these questions, we survey members of the lower chamber of the Irish parliament (Dáil Éireann) on their experiences as elected officials during the pandemic.¹ The Irish case is particularly interesting because it represents an instance of a party-dominated legislature but one where legislators are ordinarily highly responsive to constituents' preferences, including through constituency casework. Is such a configuration conducive to executive aggrandisement during and because of Covid-19 (Bolleyer & Salát, 2021; Bromo et al., 2024) or did Irish parliamentarians feel capable of representing their constituents and challenging the executive? The Irish parliament had already experienced dramatic changes prior to the pandemic, including an ambitious digital drive in the public-citizen interface, extensive Dáil reforms, and the collapse of the old 'two-and-a-half' party system, which has seen a plethora of new political forces entering the political mix. For the most part, these changes were anticipated and, at least in some cases, relatively gradual (Lynch et al., 2017); the pandemic, by contrast, was unexpected and sudden in its impact – an impact that had the potential to affect significantly both the modes of operation of the parliament and extra-legislative representation.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. First, we discuss key findings from scholars who have explored the operation of parliaments during the Covid-19 pandemic – a still evolving area of study to which this paper hopes to contribute. Next, we introduce the Irish case and the impact of Covid-19 on government and politics in Ireland, including an overview of how the Irish Parliament functioned during the pandemic. We then introduce our survey and present key findings. We conclude by exploring wider implications of the findings and suggestions for future research.

1. Covid-19 and parliaments

Given their constitutional and representative roles, national parliaments arguably had no choice but to play a central role in the response to the pandemic. Yet, this role could be different and diminished compared to normal times, owing to a perceived need to concentrate power in the executive during times of crisis. Moreover, parliaments are typically collegial and deliberative bodies, a form of organisation and work which would be

particularly challenging in the presence of polices such as stay-at-home orders and social distancing requirements. Therefore, few would surely disagree with Norton's (2020) view that Covid-19 presented an unprecedented challenge to national parliaments, at least in peacetime.

A body of scholarship is emerging on how different parliaments and the parliamentarians who populate them responded to the challenges. One set of literature has focused on behaviour of parliament as an institution during Covid-19. For example, looking at the national parliaments across 152 countries, Bar-Siman-Tov et al. (2021) develop indices of parliamentary activity and technological innovation, finding that while some legislatures effectively ceased functioning and some remained fully functioning, most legislatures functioned partially during the first wave of the pandemic. In a related study of 159 parliaments, Waismel-Manor et al. (2024) explored the extent to which parliaments remained open and continued to operate during the early phase of the pandemic. They found that the use of technological devices in lieu of physical presence facilitated relatively greater levels of parliamentary activity. Digitalisation in parliamentary activity was thus key to allowing parliaments to function, with a surprising willingness of parliamentary institutions to adopt new technology and forms of working to facilitate parliamentary business. Griglio (2020) notes that while the level of parliamentary deliberation was necessarily curtailed during the pandemic, most parliaments responded practically to the challenges, evolving their oversight practices. Yet, while digital solutions were useful to help collect information, the analysis needed for effective executive oversight was difficult owing to the lack of capacity to deliberate. Drawing on principal-agent and veto-player approaches and reviewing multiple sources of information and research on parliaments and the pandemic in 31 mostly European democracies, Chiru (2024) noted that legislatures with pre-existing scrutiny-facilitating procedures and organisation were better able to perform oversight of the executive during the pandemic. Being embedded within a strong democratic framework, incongruent bicameralism, single party government, and institutional opportunities for opposition influence (such as strong committees and a parliamentary question time) all facilitated relatively greater parliamentary involvement during the Covid-19 crisis (see also, Chiru, 2023 for a more extensive review of the literature). In an impressive and ongoing collaboration between scholars and parliamentary staff and practitioners, Siefken et al. (2021) have set out to map how parliaments around the world adjusted their working methods and with what consequences – in terms of the role of parliament, shifts in power between the legislature and executive, and public perception of the role of parliament during the pandemic. Bolleyer and Salát (2021) explore the topic of parliamentary disempowerment via executive aggrandisement during and because of Covid-19, showing how coalition governments and governments comprised of populist parties were more likely to trigger emergency

procedures and less likely to maintain parliament's formal policy making powers. Bromo et al. (2024) suggest that the level of pre-pandemic executive dominance helps explain the level of executive aggrandisement during the pandemic, including the degree to which parliament played a more limited role. In France, Israel, Italy, and the UK, executive power and influence increased at the cost to parliamentary accountability and oversight, whereas it did not in the case of Canada or Germany. Exploring variation in how the Danish and Italian parliaments responded to the initial phase of Covid 19, Pedersen and Borghetto (2021) note that the *a priori* relatively stronger Danish parliament was able to temper executive power by developing new control and oversight procedures, such as sunset clauses and a special oversight committee, whereas the relatively weaker Italian parliament was bypassed by the Italian government, which was able to rely on emergency procedures and rule by decree during the pandemic. Looking at the German case, Siefken (2023) rejects the notion that the *Bundestag* subordinated itself to the government – while the first wave of the pandemic may have been particularly challenging for parliament, the *Bundestag* worked to ensure it maintained its legislative oversight and decision-making role, likely partly in response to voiced fears at the time that parliament would have a diminished role.

A related set of literature focuses on the behaviour of individual parliamentarians and how their role orientation might have been impacted by Covid-19. Piscopo and Franceschet (2022) conducted a survey of US state legislators between July and September 2020 to explore the impact of the pandemic on legislators' policymaking and constituency representation roles as well as overall workload and job satisfaction. Their findings suggest that US state legislators tended to feel less able to influence public policy (and especially any specialist policy areas they would have ordinarily worked on) and less able to serve constituents, despite spending more time on constituency service during the pandemic – although representatives remained eager to play an effective role in policy making and constituency service. Hájek (2023), looking at the Czech case, notes that the volume of legislative work increased substantially, in large part due to the number of bills related to Covid-19, although voting behaviour within the chamber continued along party lines, or at least with strong intra-party voting unity. Noting the tensions between the governance and representational roles of national legislatures and focusing on the Canadian case, Malloy (2020) shows how the Covid-19 crisis exacerbated these tensions, with accountability and scrutiny of government actions remaining but with an increase in the role of party leaders at the expense of backbench power and thus voter representation. Reporting on research in the German case, including interviews with 33 members of the *Bundestag*, Siefken (2021) notes that the demand for constituency work increased during the pandemic, an increase which was aided by digitalisation, but with challenges emerging in terms of

voters' expectations of the role of parliamentarians in the constituency realm during times of crisis. Looking at the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany, Israel, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, Louwerse et al. (2021) found that members of the opposition moved to more negative sentiment in parliamentary debates as the pandemic progressed.

2. The Irish case

Ireland typifies a parliamentary democracy with many but not all the characteristics of the Westminster model of democracy. The bicameral legislature consists of a directly elected lower chamber – Dáil Éireann – and a partly indirectly elected, partly appointed upper chamber – Seanad Éireann. The government is accountable to Dáil Éireann. Even by comparative standards, the Irish parliament is often characterised as lacking the capacity and will to perform fully and effectively its various constitutional roles, including law-making and holding the government to account (see, for example, MacCarthaigh, 2005). Highly disciplined political parties mean legislative dissent is rare (Farrell et al., 2015). The government enjoys many procedural advantages; parliamentary committees continue to be relatively weak relative to other national parliaments (André et al., 2016) even if recent parliamentary reforms have not been insignificant (Lynch et al., 2017; Lynch & MacCarthaigh, 2023). Moreover, cultural and institutional reasons (e.g. the electoral system) mean members must expend considerable time on extra-legislative activities, leaving them less time to invest in their lawmaking and oversight roles. Yet, this latter 'weakness' is also arguably a real strength of the Irish parliamentary system: the candidate-centred electoral system encourages and rewards strong linkage between parliamentarian and constituents, with parliamentarians spending significant time both in their constituencies and on constituency-related work, such as individual constituency case work. Hence, Irish parliamentarians are highly restrained by their party leaders, but are also expected to be highly responsive to their constituents, and it is within this environment that their role orientation (Andeweg, 2014) happens both in normal and in extraordinary times.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected Ireland as badly as in other European countries. As of the last official count (November 2023), more than 1.7 million people are known to have contracted the virus (a third of the population), and there have been 9366 deaths.² There is no doubt, therefore, that much as in other countries, the pandemic had significant impacts on the operation of parliament (Chiru, 2024); although, in the case of the Irish state, the response was at least somewhat conditioned by the Constitution (e.g. under article 28.3.3, a state of emergency can only be called in a time of war). And, at least initially, it was made more complicated by the timing of the outcome of the 2020 general election. The arrival of the

pandemic coincided with an unprecedentedly long interregnum between polling day and the election of a new government (O'Malley, 2021). During this impasse, the outgoing government secured the support of the opposition parties to pass a series of statutes giving additional powers to the minister for health to introduce regulations as deemed necessary.

The delay in electing a new government impacted in turn on the Oireachtas. In effect, the Dáil was in limbo and ultimately went into an extended recess, one that was prolonged while it sought out a larger venue where it could meet safely. And Oireachtas committees could not be formed. In this interim period, the Oireachtas established, in early May 2020, a 'Special Committee on Covid-19 Response', whose remit was 'to consider and take evidence on the State's response to the Covid-19 pandemic'.³ Given its broad sweep, the committee was supported by four clerks. It operated in hybrid mode with members and staff rotated in and out of the committee room (the rule then was that no one could be present in the room for more than two hours).

By the end of the summer, more familiar parliamentary services started to emerge. A new government was finally elected on June 27, which meant that the Oireachtas committees could be formed. Among the first of these was the Finance committee (which needed to be up and running to meet the budgetary cycle) in early September and into October. The establishment of the Oireachtas committees coincided with the work of the Special Committee coming to an end. To all intents and purposes, the Oireachtas returned to politics as normal, albeit with committees continuing to operate in hybrid format involving some members present in the committee room and the others beaming in (on MS Teams) from their Oireachtas offices. A complicating factor is the Constitutional rule (art. 15.11.1) that requires Oireachtas members to be 'present and voting'. This meant that when the committees voted, it had to be done in-person.

This constitutional rule also influenced what was decided regarding the meetings of both Houses of the Oireachtas. Article 15.3 of the Irish constitution provides that: 'The Houses of the Oireachtas shall sit in or near the City of Dublin or in such other place as they may from time to time determine'.⁴ This was interpreted to mean that virtual sittings of the Irish parliament would be unconstitutional, as remotely joining a setting would contravene the notion of Parliament meeting in a 'place'. This interpretation was not shared by all constitutional experts (see, for example, Casey & Kenny, 2023, p. 255). Nevertheless, as a result, remote hearing did not feature as part of the Irish parliament's response to Covid-19 and instead the Dáil relocated to the Dublin Convention Centre (where it was to reside from October 2020 to September 2021), with the Seanad occupying the Dáil chamber depending on circumstances.⁵ Overall, while the Oireachtas continued to perform its formal role in terms of law-making, from a legal

perspective at least, ‘parliamentary oversight of Covid regulations in Ireland was minimal or nugatory’ (Casey & Kenny, 2023, p. 256).

3. A survey of parliamentarians and the pandemic

This paper draws on a larger research project exploring the changing nature of the work of Irish parliamentarians. The project involves a survey of members of the Oireachtas undertaken with the co-operation and support of the parliamentary administration (the Houses of the Oireachtas Service), and parliamentary leadership. Reflecting the co-produced nature of the research, a draft survey instrument was developed with staff from the parliamentary services, covering questions across a variety of topics, including members’ views on the impact of Covid-19 on their work. The survey was conducted between late March and early August 2023.⁶ All 160 TDs were surveyed with the list and contact details of each member drawn from the parliament’s website.⁷

Surveys of members remain one of the most popular methods in legislative studies to understand the preferences and opinions of parliamentarians, providing arguably the most direct insight into parliamentarians’ own viewpoint (Bailer, 2014). Other data collection efforts – such as roll-call analysis of parliamentary divisions and the analysis of parliamentary text – while undoubtedly very valuable in building an overall picture of legislative activity and revealed preferences, can suffer from the fact that political parties and party leaders often influence, shape, and perhaps even determine the behaviour of parliamentarians we can observe.

Exactly because surveys continue to be a popular method to explore parliamentarians’ perspectives, allied to the increasing ease and low-cost by which they can be launched, means that elected officials are increasingly overloaded with survey requests, which has reduced their propensity to engage with and complete the survey. To help increase response rates, we followed several suggestions offered by Bailer (2014) regarding how to conduct surveys in legislative research. These included timing (to ensure the survey corresponded to the dates when members would be most likely to be in their parliamentary offices), careful consideration as to the number of questions and length of the survey, using personalised correspondence, offering that the results of the research will be made available to respondents, and making repeated calls for participation. With regard to the latter, four waves of the survey were released: initially an email invitation (with link) was sent to members on March 29th 2023 using the Qualtrics platform. Non-respondents received a ‘reminder’ email on April 12th. This was followed by a paper-based survey mailed May 15, 2023, with a second paper-based copy of the survey dispatched on June 16, 2023.

Also, to maximise response rates, and reflecting the co-produced nature of the research project, the presiding officers (Ceann Comhairle and Cathaoirleach) of both chambers of the Irish parliament, kindly emailed all members ahead of the first wave of the survey – introducing the survey and asking for the co-operation of members in the research project. For the fourth wave, a letter from the presiding officers was included alongside the cover letter. Both emails and cover letters referenced that this research was being conducted in cooperation with the parliamentary administration and leadership. In total 51 TDs responded – representing a response rate of 31.9 per cent.⁸

To explore the degree to which the respondents reflect or differ from the composition of the chamber, Table 1 reports response rates by political party grouping. Notable is variation in response rates by political party groupings. In particular, TDs from the Green Party were most likely to respond, and almost three times as likely as members from Sinn Féin.

One of our key questions in this paper concerns the potential impact of a member's gender on their experience of Covid-19 and their role orientation and working methods. As in most national parliaments, women form a minority of members of the Irish parliament and this is reflected in the number of women versus male respondents: women account for 14 of the 51 responses, representing 27.45 per cent of survey respondents. In terms of response rates, proportionately more women than men responded to our survey: The response rate for male TDs is 29.84 per cent compared with a response rate of 38.89 per cent for women.

4. Results and analysis

To help better understand the impact of Covid-19 on members of parliament, our survey included a series of questions focused around two inter-related themes: (1) the impact of Covid-19 on members' parliamentary work, and (2) the impact of Covid-19 on members' extra-parliamentary/constituency work. We discuss each in turn.

Table 1. Response rates by political party group.

Party	Number of TDs	Number of responses	Response rate (%)
Fianna Fail (FF)	37	9	24.32
Sinn Fein (SF)	36	7	19.44
Fine Gael (FG)	34	12	35.29
Independents (Ind)	21	6	28.57
Green Party (GP)	12	7	58.33
Labour Party (LP)	7	2	28.57
Social Democrats (SD)	6	1	16.67
Solidarity-People Before Profit (SPBP)	5	1	20
Independent 4 Change (I4C)	1	1	100
Aontú (AON)	1	0	0
<i>N</i>	160	51	31.88

4.1. Parliamentary work

As was apparent to even the most casual observer of public life during Covid-19, politics and governance operated differently during the height of the pandemic. Indeed, a number of studies have documented not just how different governments responded differently to the pandemic but how governance itself changed (see, for example, Cheibub et al., 2020; Engler et al., 2021; Vasilopoulos et al., 2023). In several countries, emergency and government decree powers allowed the executive to make decisions that would ordinarily be the preserve of the national parliament, with consequences for both the formal and *de facto* role played by national parliaments during the pandemic (Bolleyer & Salát, 2021).⁹

The first question we explore in the survey concerns the degree to which Irish parliamentarians felt parliamentary oversight of the government changed during Covid-19. In ordinary times, Ireland is often cited as an example of a political system where the executive dominates the legislature (Martin, 2021). Executive dominance can be thought of as the imbalance in the relative power of the executive and legislature (Lijphart, 1999, p. 129), where the unevenness favours the executive. Highly disciplined parties (Depauw & Martin, 2008) combined with various executive prerogatives over the legislative process (Rasch, 2014) mean that the cabinet in parliamentary systems commonly dominates decision making within the chamber (Cox, 2005). This *de facto* dominance allows the cabinet to get the legislation it wants.

To judge how – and if so, in what way – the pandemic changed executive-legislative relations in Ireland, we asked members whether they believed parliamentary oversight of the government was reduced during Covid-19. The results are reported in Figure 1. Just under 44 per cent of respondents agreed that parliamentary oversight of the government was reduced during Covid-19. In contrast, 28 per cent of respondents disagreed and almost 30 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.¹⁰

To delve a little deeper, we asked a series of questions exploring the impact of the pandemic on more specific parliamentary functions, starting with law-making. The ability to make laws is a defining feature of national parliaments, although individual parliamentarians' ability to influence the legislative process varies significantly across different political systems. Of course, as throughout the paper, our interest here is on whether Covid-19 affected the operation of parliament. Hence, our interest is in the degree to which the pandemic changed parliamentarians' capacity to engage and influence law making. The results in Figure 2 are notable: the vast majority of respondents (60 per cent) agreed that their ability to impact on the legislative process was reduced during Covid-19; only 20 per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement. For a parliament where the ability of members to

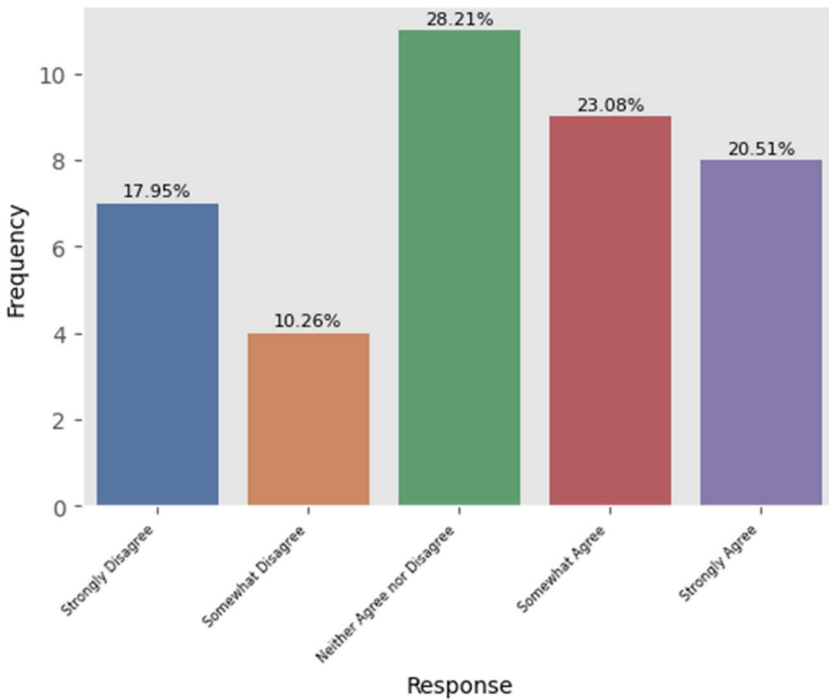


Figure 1. Reduced parliamentary oversight, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'Parliamentary oversight of the government was reduced during Covid-19'.

impact on law making was already relatively low (despite recent reforms), this is a particularly thought-provoking finding and perhaps even of some normative concern – pointing to an increased capacity of the executive to determine what became law and reflecting a fear of executive aggrandisement during and because of Covid-19 (Bolleyer & Salát, 2021; Bromo et al., 2024).

While plenary activity on the floor of the chamber often gathers most attention, it is generally believed that a strong system of parliamentary committees is a necessary condition for parliament to function effectively, not least in terms of influencing the content of legislation and holding the government to account. From a relatively weak organisational base, parliamentary committees in Ireland have strengthened significantly in recent years (André et al., 2016; Lynch et al., 2017). As we noted above, parliamentary committees faced challenges in being established and operating during the pandemic. For members who sit on committees, we wanted to understand to what degree their ability to work on committees was negatively affected by the pandemic. Figure 3 presents the responses, which are very mixed: 45 per cent of respondents agreed that their ability to perform committee

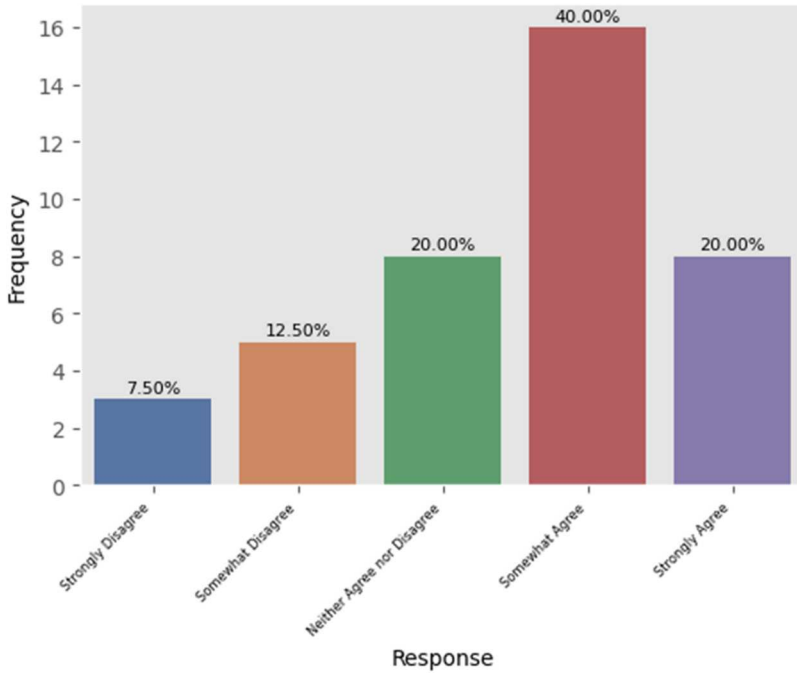


Figure 2. Reduced ability to impact legislative proposals, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'My ability as a parliamentarian to impact legislative proposals was reduced during Covid-19?'

work was negatively impacted during Covid-19. In contrast, 20 per cent disagreed with the statement, while 35 per cent of respondents were neutral, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Overall, then, a plurality of respondents agreed strongly or somewhat that committee work was affected negatively by Covid-19.

As we likely all remember, the need to maintain social distance changed what was possible in terms of face-to-face meetings and in particular large gatherings. Plenary meetings of legislatures around the world were of course particularly hit, as noted above. We wanted to understand how members felt about the physical move of the Dáil from the parliamentary estate (Leinster House) to the Dublin Convention Centre. We asked them if the move from Leinster House made their ability to undertake parliamentary business more difficult, and the results are presented in [Figure 4](#). Over 60 per cent of members who responded agreed that the move made undertaking parliamentary work more difficult, and, indeed, of these the clear majority strongly agreed with the viewpoint. In contrast, just over 22 per cent of respondents disagreed. Of course, nothing in these results indicate whether it was a correct decision to move some parliamentary business to

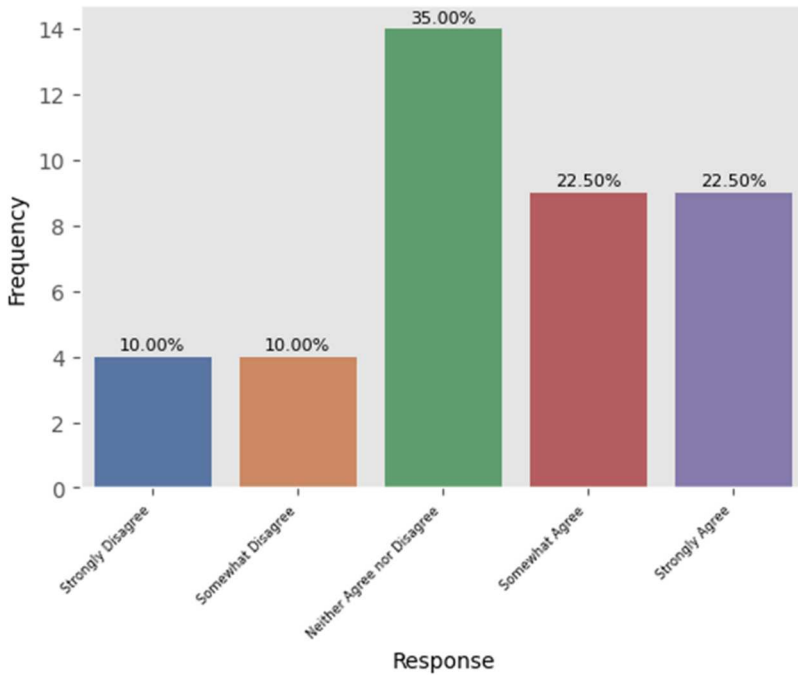


Figure 3. Negative impact on committee work, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'My ability to perform committee work (if relevant) was negatively impacted during Covid-19?'

an alternative location; it merely points to the difficulty this created for members. But any assessment must surely account for the fact that the very nature of the pandemic disrupted the ability of parliament to meet in person and perform its constitutional and other roles.

Within the workplace, one of the most significant impacts of the pandemic certainly relates to the rapid deployment of new technologies to overcome some of the challenges that prevented business-as-usual activities, such as in-person meetings (Karl et al., 2022). While many welcomed the benefits of working-from-home and the efficiencies of online meetings, it could be that the in-person component of working alongside other parliamentarians, and the informal way in which business often gets transacted alongside formal parliamentary processes (Norton, 2019), might hamper members' ability to perform their parliamentary roles (we discuss constituency work below). We asked members if the greater use of technology has made their parliamentary work easier, and the responses are provided in Figure 5. A significant majority (75 per cent) agreed that the deployment of technology has made their parliamentary work easier. And very few disagree: fewer than 8 per cent of respondents somewhat disagreed and no respondent strongly

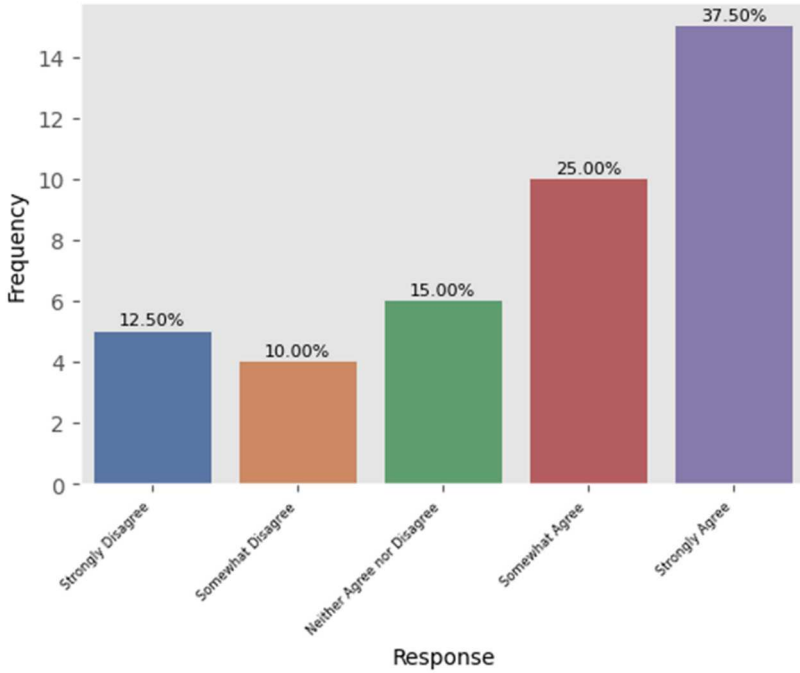


Figure 4. The negative impact of moving meetings from Leinster House, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'The temporary move from Leinster House made my ability to undertake parliamentary business more difficult?'

disagreed. Thus, while society still debates the relative merits of technology which emerged from or at least become far more popular during the pandemic, Irish parliamentarians at least seem largely of the view that this was a positive development.

Of course, the impact of Covid-19 on how we work has changed in ways additional to greater use of technologies, even when in-person meetings became possible. Technology meant that increased time was spent working from home or from constituency offices, and virtual participation in committees was facilitated. Some of these work practices have continued post-pandemic and we wanted to understand whether the changes brought about by Covid-19, and which remain in place, positively affected members' ability to undertake their parliamentary work. [Figure 6](#) presents data on this. And as with the question on technology above, the answer is clear, if not as clear: 60 per cent of respondents reported that the changing ways of work has positively impacted on the way in which they are able to conduct parliamentary business, with only 10 per cent of members disagreeing. As with many of the questions, a surprising number of members (30 per cent in the case of this question) neither agree nor disagree with the statement posed.

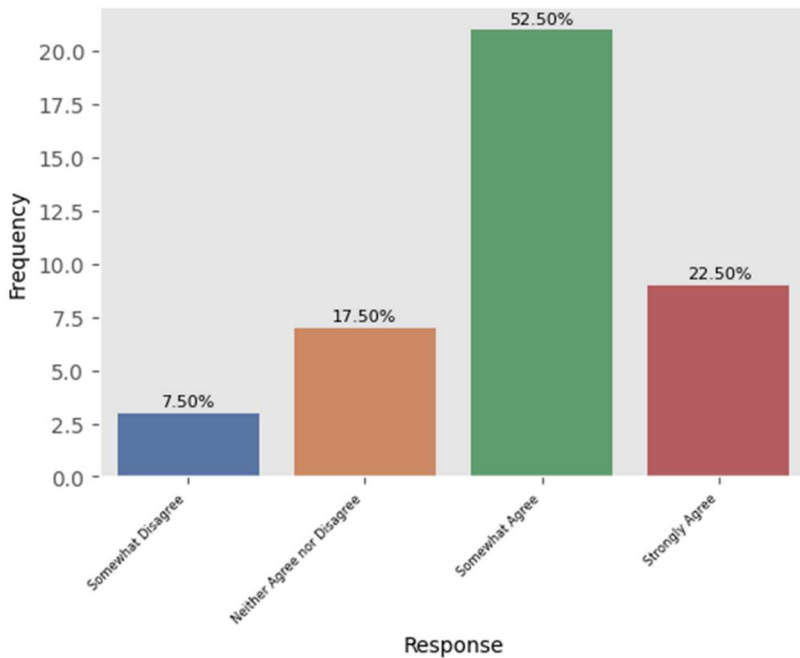


Figure 5. The positive impact of technology on parliamentary work, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'Greater use of technology has made my parliamentary work easier?'

Finally, in this discussion on parliamentary business and the impact of Covid-19, we return to parliamentary committees. Given, as noted above, the central importance of committees in parliamentary business and in particular their essential role in law-making and oversight, we wanted to understand if the changing ways of working brought about by Covid-19 has affected the way in which members participate in parliamentary committee meetings. Committees only work if members are fully engaged, and because members are typically very busy people with significant competing demands on their time, it can be difficult for members to find the capacity to commit fully to committee meetings. Arguably, this is exacerbated in the Irish case, where members must expend significant effort on constituency work to be re-elected and where committee work (or indeed parliamentary work more generally) is typically not an avenue for constituency work and personal vote cultivation (Martin & Mickler, 2019). How then has the changing nature of how parliament works in Ireland affected members' engagement with the committees they serve on? The evidence in Figure 7 suggests that the views of members are very mixed: Exactly half of respondents believed that it was not true that changing ways of working negatively affected how they speak and participate in

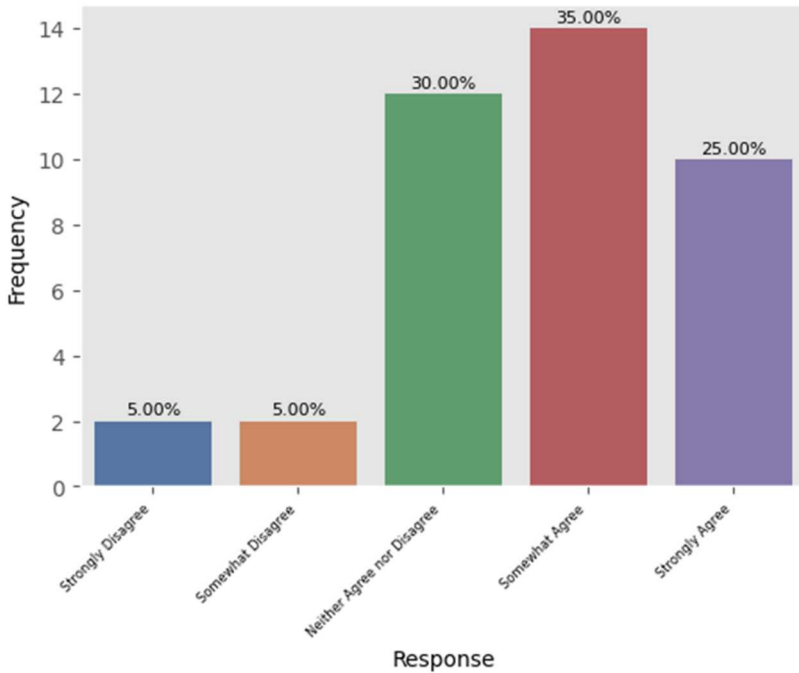


Figure 6. The positive impact of changing ways of working on parliamentary business, Note: Based on response to the question: 'The way in which I conduct my parliamentary business has been positively impacted by the changing ways of working brought about by Covid-19?'

parliamentary committees. On the reverse side, just under 13 per cent felt that changes did indeed negatively affect their engagement with committee work. And just under 38 per cent felt that the changes had no impact on the way in which they speak/participate in parliamentary committee meetings. The responses to this question suggest to us that while many members welcomed the changing ways of how committees work, this was far from universal.

4.2. Constituency work

A large body of research points to Dáil deputies spending significant proportion of their effort and time on constituency matters. For example, Wood and Young (1997) find that Irish legislators dedicate almost 60 per cent of their time to constituency affairs and spend 2.5 days per week in the constituency; a similarly high proportion of constituency-related activities is reported in a 2010 survey of TDs (Farrell et al., 2015). Even activities within the parliamentary arena, such as asking parliamentary questions, tend to have a heavy component of constituency orientation (Martin, 2011). But,

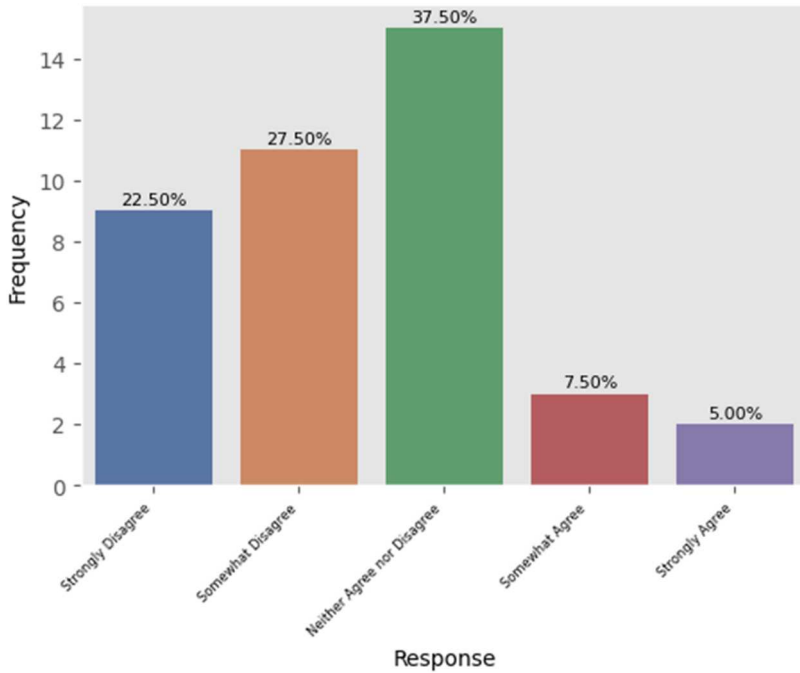


Figure 7. The negative impact of changing ways of working on committee work, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'The way in which I speak/participate in parliamentary committee meetings has been negatively impacted by the changing ways of working brought about by Covid-19'.

for the most part, this work is typically extra-parliamentary – meaning it occurs outside the formal parliamentary setting. Examples include dealing with constituency case work and attending meetings or other events in the constituency. Obviously, at certain stages of the pandemic, attending physical meetings in a member's constituency became impossible – a factor which may reduce both constituents' demand for, and members' opportunities to provide, constituency service.

On the other hand, evidence from other settings suggest that as voters faced new and greater pressure in their personal and professional lives because of the pandemic, more citizens reached out and reached out more often to their elected representatives (Piscopo & Franceschet, 2022). In the Irish case, the survey of TDs reveals a similar picture in terms of change in the volume of constituency work for members during Covid-19, as shown in Figure 8. Indeed, 55 per cent of respondents reported that their constituency case load increased. In contrast, just over 17 per cent of members disagreed that they saw increased constituency workload during the pandemic.

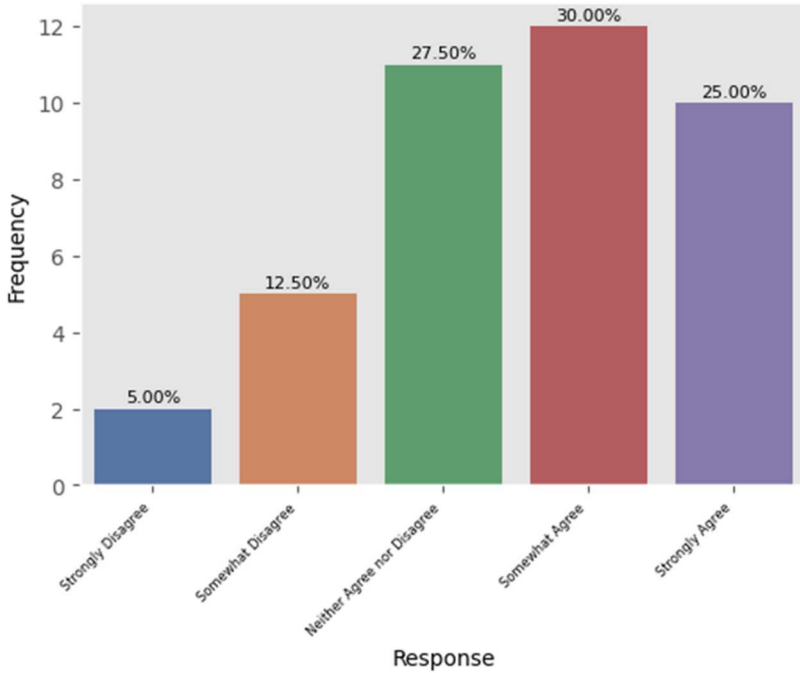


Figure 8. Increases to the volume of constituency work, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'The volume of constituency work increased during Covid-19'.

Nevertheless, despite this increased workload members still felt able to represent their constituents during Covid-19. The results are presented in [Figure 9](#). The vast majority (60 per cent) of TDs who responded indicated that they did feel able to appropriately continue to represent their constituents, although of these a far higher percentage only 'somewhat agreed' with the statement. In contrast, just over 22 per cent of TDs disagreed that they were appropriately able to represent their constituents during Covid-19. Overall, we take the answer to this survey question to indicate that most TDs felt sufficiently empowered to continue their representative role during the pandemic.

To a degree, this positive trend is also reflected in responses to the question of whether the way in which members were able to represent the general interests of their constituency had been positively, negatively, or not affected by the changing ways of working brought about by Covid-19. While a significant number of respondents (over 47 per cent) neither agreed nor disagreed, [Figure 10](#) suggests that constituents' representation was mostly positively impacted by the changing ways of working brought about by Covid-19, with 42 per cent feeling that it had been positively affected.

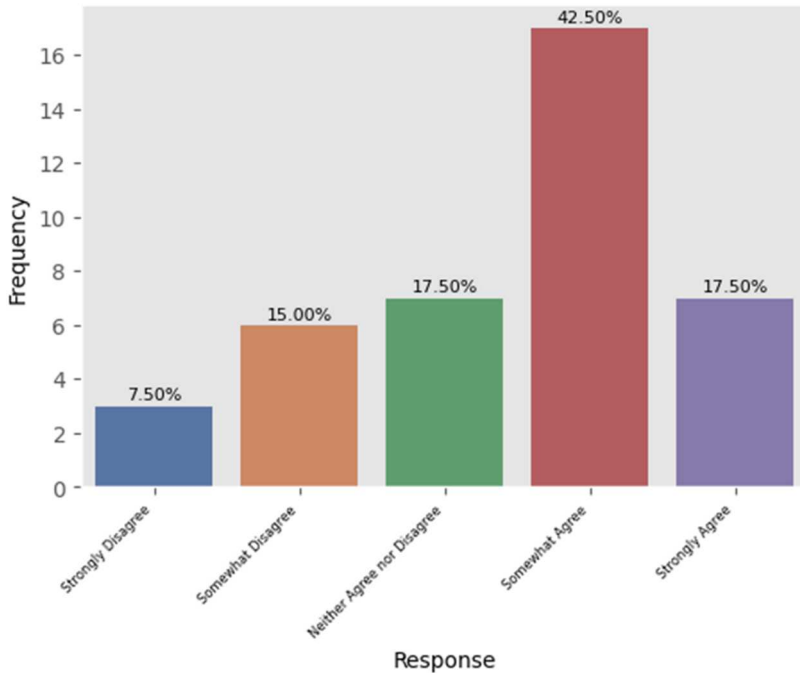


Figure 9. Increased ability to represent constituents, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'I felt able to appropriately represent my constituents during Covid-19'.

One factor feeding potentially into the relatively positive perspective on constituency representation was the greater use of technology, as suggested by the trends reported in [Figure 11](#). The great majority of respondents disagreed with the suggestion that technology made constituency work harder. Only 10 per cent of respondents (and all of these only somewhat agreed), suggested that the greater use of technology during the pandemic made their constituency work harder.

Looking beyond a focus solely on changes in technology, to the overall changing ways of working brought about by Covid-19, we asked members if this affected how they worked on individual constituents' cases. The results in [Figure 12](#) suggest a mixed picture. The majority of respondents (52 per cent) reported that new ways of working did not negatively impact on how they were able to work on individual constituents' cases, with a quarter of other respondents indicating the changing ways of working had no impact.

In summary, it is clear that Covid-19 had impacted on members' parliamentary and constituency roles, but this was tempered somewhat by the reactions of the Oireachtas authorities, especially in the form of technological changes designed to support the work of members. We sought to gauge

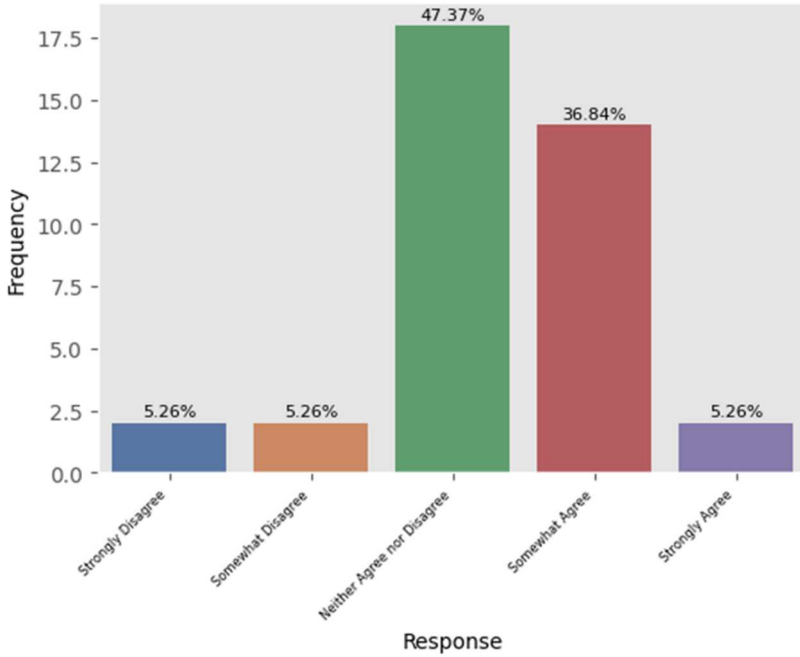


Figure 10. Positive impact on constituency representation, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'The way in which I represent the general interests of my constituency have been positively impacted by the changing ways of working brought about by Covid-19'.

members' overall assessment regarding the impact of the changes made by the parliamentary administration and leadership on members' ability to work effectively and impactfully. Figure 13 presents the results, and for the most part the message is positive: just under 58 per cent of members feel that on the whole, the Oireachtas services and leadership introduced measures which allowed them to work effectively and impactfully despite Covid-19 restrictions. In contrast, only a small proportion of members (10 per cent) felt the opposite – that the measures introduced reduced their effectiveness and impact. Again, somewhat surprisingly, a significant number of respondents (almost one third) neither disagreed nor agreed with the statement.

5. Conclusion

Covid-19 presented extraordinary challenges to the functioning and operation of national parliaments and to the professional staff and elected parliamentarians who populate parliament. This article explored the impact of Covid-19 on parliament from the point of view of its elected members,

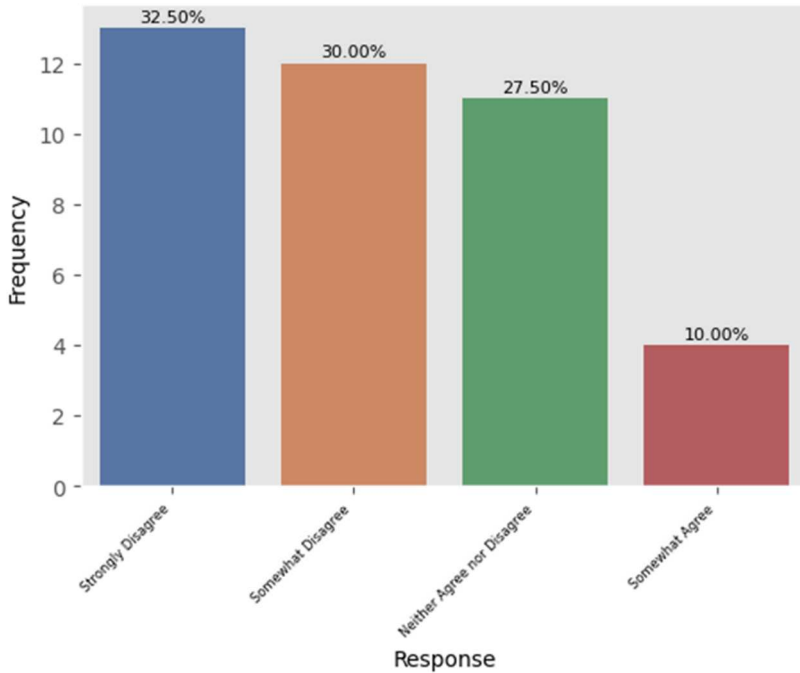


Figure 11. Negative impact of technology on constituency work, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'Greater use of technology has made my constituency work harder'.

employing a survey of members of the lower chamber of the Irish parliament to do so.

Overall, we find somewhat mixed patterns across (1) the nature of the member's role and (2) over time. In the first instance, the impact of the pandemic appears to have been more negative in relation to members' parliamentary roles. To a degree, the long interregnum between governments, which among other things prevented the establishment of Oireachtas committees, somewhat fed into this, as did certain constitutional restrictions (e.g. complicating the move to online meetings). But it also reflected the challenges faced by the Dáil authorities in reacting to this unprecedented crisis. This had notable implications for the nature of parliamentary oversight of lawmaking and the executive: TDs (at least of those who responded to the survey) reported significant impacts on their ability to influence legislative proposals, on their parliamentary committee work, and on parliamentary business generally. In short, there were clear negative implications for the oversight and accountability functions of Dáil Éireann.

By contrast, the impact of the pandemic on members' constituency roles appears to have been more mixed: it resulted in increased workload, but for

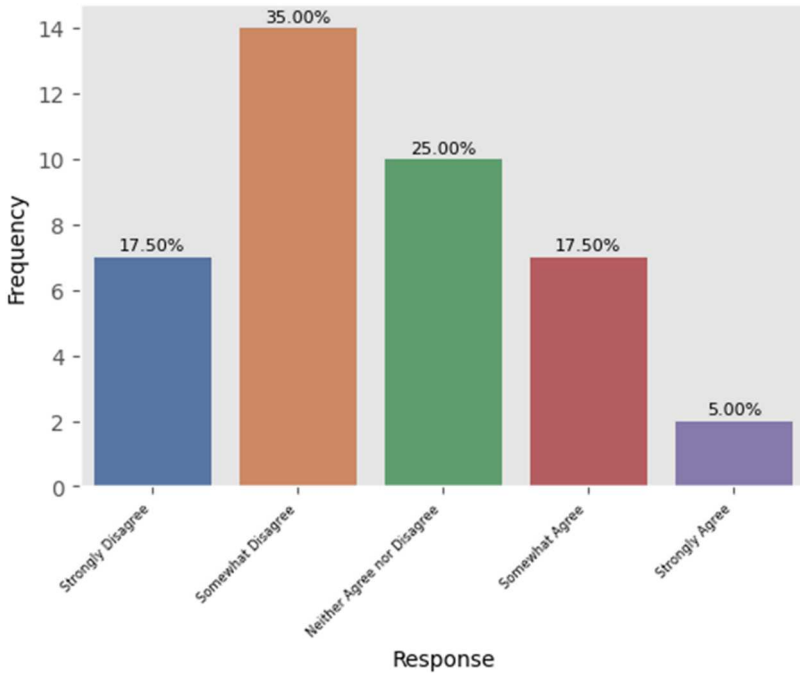


Figure 12. Negative changes to ways of working and constituency casework, Note: Based on response to the statement: 'The ways in which I work on individual constituents' cases has been negatively impacted by the changing ways of working brought about by Covid-19'.

the most part members felt able to carry out their constituency roles. Perhaps in part this simply reflects the fact that adapting the constituency service operation was that bit easier than adapting the parliamentary role: members were able to move their operations online quite quickly without facing the sorts of delays (constitution and government formation stalemate-related) that affected their parliamentary roles.

We note an arguably interesting potential paradox between TDs' confidence that they continued to be able to represent their constituents and the finding that 60 per cent of respondents felt that their ability to impact on the legislative process was reduced during Covid-19. It could be that this counterintuitive finding in part reflects the impact of Covid-19 on parliamentary politics in a typically executive-dominated, constituency-oriented legislature such as the Irish parliament: the pandemic exacerbated the inability of parliamentarians to influence the legislative process, but because shaping legislation is not a typical way in such parliaments for constituents to be 'represented', during Covid-19 parliamentarians were nonetheless able to continue to look to non-lawmaking activities (such as parliamentary speeches and parliamentary questions) to continue to

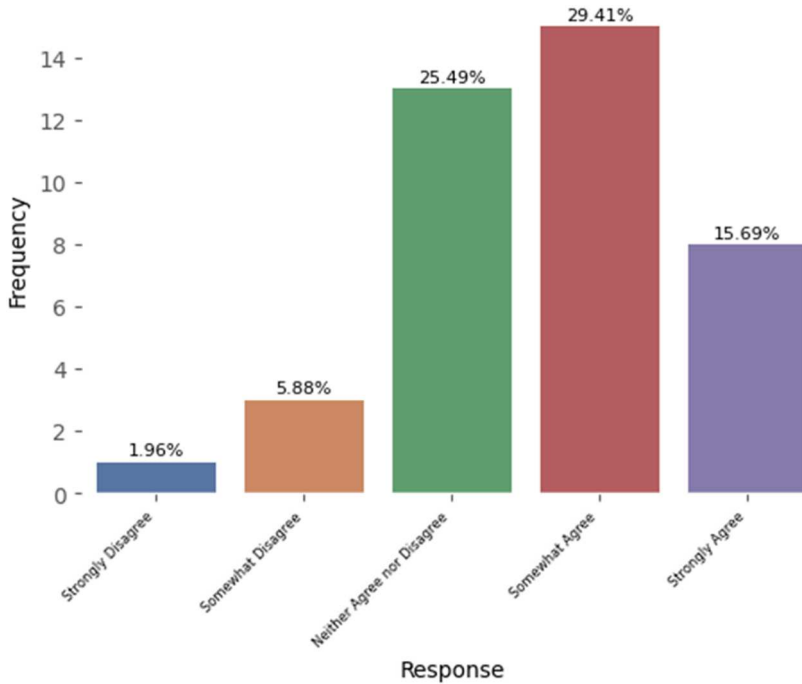


Figure 13. Positive views on leadership, Note: Based on response to the statement: ‘On the whole, the Oireachtas services and leadership introduced measures which allowed me to work effectively and impactfully despite Covid-19 restrictions’.

represent the views and concerns of their constituents and continue to prioritise extra-parliamentary constituency service.

It is this process of adaption that speaks to our second main point about a mixed pattern over time. The immediate impact of the pandemic may have been negative (particularly for members’ parliamentary roles), but over time a distinctly more positive trend became apparent, resulting primarily from the technological changes implemented in the heat of the Covid-19 crisis, changes that in large part remain in place to this day.

The impacts were felt in terms of members’ accountability roles (most TDs reporting that the changing way of doing parliamentary business improved things, and this included their committee work), as well as their representative functions (most feeling they could represent their constituents better, and that even though constituency work had increased most felt that technology made it easier and that the quality of their constituency work had not been affected negatively).

Although the pace of change varies over time and across countries, parliaments are continuously evolving institutions (Sieberer et al., 2016). While Covid-19 hopefully represented a once in a lifetime challenge to how we live and work, parliaments were not immune from the need to adapt

quickly. Some aspects of Ireland's constitutional landscape limited the level of innovation (for example, the decision that virtual meetings of the plenary would be unconstitutional), but in general, like other parliaments, the Oireachtas adapted quickly, and for the most part, at least from the viewpoint of members, effectively. Still, as a chamber which often struggled to shape proposed legislation despite strong linkages between representatives and constituents, Covid-19 presented a particular challenge for the Irish parliament and Irish parliamentarians of how to avoid executive aggrandisement while also maintaining constituency-based representation. From the perspective of members at least, constituency orientation remained strong and were perhaps even improved using technology, but the challenge of executive domination of the legislature was exacerbated by the pandemic.

Despite some exceptional research to date (including as noted in the literature review), much work remains to both describe how parliament changed because of the pandemic and explain why, and with what consequences. The research questions on institutional change and behavioural change during the pandemic provides unique opportunities for cross-national comparative research, which, to be most impactful, also requires legislative scholars to likely collaborate on a scale heretofore not seen.¹¹ And given that the pandemic was experienced differently by different groups in society, future work should combine survey research with empirical strategies such as text-as-data analysis of parliamentary activities including speeches and parliamentary questions to explore better how characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, age, seniority, and electoral vulnerability impacted parliamentarians' work during the pandemic.

Additionally, as the immediate impact of the pandemic both recedes and time moves on, it will be worth studying the degree to which the initial responses to the pandemic have had lasting impacts. In terms of institutional procedures and design, but also culturally and behaviourally, have parliaments, parliamentarians, and citizens returned to pre-pandemic ways of understanding the role and function of parliament or have the changes outlasted the pandemic and remained following so-called return to normal times and business-as-usual? Moreover, what lessons and knowledge have parliaments embedded into their structures, leadership, and governance to ensure they are prepared for future external 'once-in-a-generation' shocks which will require equally rapid and perhaps even more essential changes to how parliaments and parliamentarians work.

Notes

1. We should note that the survey was conducted during the Spring and Summer of 2023, a point in time beyond when the greatest impact of the pandemic was being felt. Thus, while the survey does capture the parliamentarians who were

serving during the pandemic (having been elected at the February 2020 General Election), we acknowledge that members' views of, perspectives on, and judgment of the pandemic and its impact on their role and the role of parliament may have been blurred and impacted by the passage of time and/or the framings and views expressed in media and elsewhere concerning how parliament responded to the pandemic.

2. <https://covid19ireland-geohive.hub.arcgis.com/>.
3. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/committees/33/special-committee-on-covid-19-response/>.
4. <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/cons/en/html>.
5. The first meeting of the Dáil in the Convention Centre was for the election of the Taoiseach in June 2020. Between then and the end of 2020, the Dáil split its meetings between Leinster House and the Convention Centre, sitting in the latter when it needed full numbers of members for voting (for divisions on the Order of Business it tended to vote with reduced numbers in the Dáil chamber). It moved full time to the Convention Centre from the start of 2021. The Seanad tended to move between the Dáil chamber or the Convention Centre depending on prevailing conditions, but was most commonly in the Dáil.
6. Ethical approval was received from the relevant panels at University College Dublin and (because of where the data would be stored) the University of Essex.
7. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/members/>.
8. The response rate for each wave is as follows: Wave 1 (email-based): 10.62 per cent; wave 2 (reminder-email): 7.69 per cent; wave 3 (first paper-based): 8.33 per cent; wave 4 (reminder paper-based): 9.92 per cent. The response rate from Senators (17 out of 60) was too low to include them in the analysis.
9. As we saw above, due to constitutional restrictions, the option of using emergency powers was not available to the government in Ireland.
10. We note that for most of the survey questions, a relatively large shares of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements they were being asked to respond to. While this is an important issue, we can't explain here the popularity of this response option.
11. A good example on ongoing collaboration on the topic is provided by the project on *Parliaments in the Pandemic*, an international collaboration organized by the Research Committee of Legislative Specialists (RC08) of the International Political Science Association (<https://ipsa-rcls.org/pip/>).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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